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Local News

Saskatoon police monitoring "freedom rally" protest after previous events resulted in fines for violating public health orders

Protesters held up signs condemning COVID-19 restrictions put in place by the government to occasional honks from passing vehicles.

Matt Olson

Dec 20, 2020 • December 20, 2020 • 5 minute read • Join the conversation



More than 100 people gathered in Saskatoon's Kiwanis Park on Saturday, Dec. 19 for a "freedom rally" protesting against various restrictions put in place to combat the spread of COVID-19, including public health orders around wearing masks and limiting gathering sizes. PHOTO BY MATT OLSON / SASKATOON STARPHOEN /Saskatoon StarPhoenix

It's not yet clear what, if any, fines will result from a "freedom rally" in downtown Saskatoon Saturday afternoon.

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More than 100 people gathered at Kiwanis Memorial Park to protest mask wearing and other restrictions put in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19.



In advance of the rally, Saskatoon police issued an advisory saying they had spoken with rally organizers and would be responding to the event. The rally was to take people on a route between the Broadway and Traffic bridges and police asked the public to avoid the area.

Police have not yet said if charges will be laid.

The crowd started small, with the first arrivals clumping together to sing Christmas carols. But the park around the Vimy Memorial eventually became filled with dozens of people looking to take part in the rally.

The rally marks the third weekend in a row in which a large public anti-mask protest has taken place in the province. On Friday, Saskatoon police issued a \$2,800 ticket under the Public Health Act to a “key participant” in a Dec. 5 protest in Saskatoon. Early last week, Regina police issued two similar fines following a Dec. 12 rally.

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Rally organizer Mark Friesen, who said he was the key participant fined in relation to the Dec. 5 protest, said that while the events taking place have been referred to as “anti-mask” rallies, he considers them to be “freedom rallies” — pushing against what he believes are unreasonable public health orders and advocating for “transparent, open discussion and dialogue” around COVID-19 restrictions. Saturday’s event was billed online as the “Saskatchewan Christmas Freedom Rally.” Friesen said attendees were welcome to come wearing masks or seeking to physically distance, though many chose not to.

Attendees brandished signs carrying slogans including “More masks more COVID?,” “YES to freedom of speech,” and “Shahab is lying” — targeting Saskatchewan’s chief medical health officer Dr. Saqib Shahab, who was the subject of racist comments at the previous week’s rally in Regina. At previous rallies, speakers and attendees shared unproven and false claims about the COVID-19 virus, government restrictions, vaccines and the use of masks.

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Saskatoon police Chief Troy Cooper said this week that officers investigated the Dec. 5 protest, looked at public health orders, and consulted with Crown prosecutors and public health officials to assist in determining if it was in the public interest to proceed with charges. He said similar events will be looked at on their own merits and evaluated on the potential harm to the community.

Police, on Friday prior to the rally, said in a statement that officers “will continue to be present at all future public gatherings that impact community safety.”

Cooper said police investigated events this spring in support of Black Lives Matter, and consulted with the Crown and public health officials about potential charges. Cooper said although there was a large BLM protest and gathering on June 4, the organizer and most participants followed public health orders by wearing masks and physically distancing.

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“Certainly I think with the steps that were taken in previous protests, we could see that there was a reduced harm, but certain(ly) it is something we treat regardless of the cause or the nature or reason behind the protest, we treat each one the same,” Cooper said.

“What we’re really hopeful for, like everybody else, is voluntary compliance so that people can remain safe in Saskatoon.”

‘LOOK AT THE REALITY’: MAYOR

Saskatoon Mayor Charlie Clark on Friday pleaded with people to avoid any rallies or public events like the one on Saturday.

“I’m just asking people to stay home, to really look at the stats, look at the reality — we’ve just surpassed 100 deaths (in Saskatchewan) from COVID this year, and we’ve been hearing desperate pleas from those who are on the front lines, the nurses and the doctors, of just how horrible it is to see people lose their lives at this time, without being able to connect with their loved ones,” Clark said.

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“They’re starting to see the health system overwhelmed, and I think there’s people who are hearing misinformation and conspiracy theories, and they’re very, very disconcerting right now because the reality is we need to support the health workers who are trying to keep people alive and to not listen to some of the misinformation and conspiracy theories that are coming around.”

FINES ARE ‘100 PER CENT AGAINST’ RIGHT TO ASSEMBLE: ORGANIZER

Friesen, in an interview, said the \$2,800 fine he received earlier this month and other such fines for violating public health orders “aren’t worth the paper they’re written on.”

“There’s what we call the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, that protects our right to assemble peacefully, and of course this is 100 per cent against that,” he said.

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According to the Saskatchewan Public Health Act, a “medical health officer may order a person to take or refrain from taking any action specified in the order that the medical health officer considers necessary to decrease or eliminate a risk to health presented by a communicable disease.” This includes “(requiring) a person to conduct himself or herself in a manner that will not expose another person to infection.”

Friesen said he did not believe the provincial government has proven the public health orders are necessary, especially when it came to outdoor gatherings such as the recent rallies.

“There’s a number of measures they’ve taken that they haven’t demonstrably proven are appropriate for the circumstance,” he said.

As of Thursday, the maximum size of an outdoor gathering under the provincial public health order was reduced to 10 people from 30 people.

— *With StarPhoenix files from Thia James*

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